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ABSTRACT

In this study, 242 adolescents were asked to indicate the likelihood that they would seek support from their mother, father, closest sibling, and closest friend when confronted with each of 24 common concerns. Mean scores were generated in eight specific and three general categories for all four target individuals. Mean scores for target individuals were compared. Mothers were the most likely source of support in the family. Siblings were rated higher than mothers for dating support, and were a more likely source of support than fathers for several areas. Peers were the most likely source of support, with higher ratings than siblings in all categories, and with higher ratings than parents in all areas except financial support, career planning, and personal values. Although ratings were similar for both genders, where differences did exist, females were more likely to go to peers and mothers for support than were males. Younger adolescents showed strong preferences for mothers and peers, while older adolescents were likely to give higher ratings to fathers and siblings in several areas. Peers were rated higher than other targets on most areas of support-seeking. Findings reinforce the importance of context and its interaction with gender and age in determining adolescents' support-seeking behavior. (Author/RH)

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The Use of Family Members and Peers as Resources during Adolescence.

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The Use of Family Members and Peers as Resources during Adolescence

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This study asked 242 adolescents to indicate how likely they would be to seek support from their mother, father, closest sibling and closest friend when confronted with each of 24 common concerns. Mean scores were generated in eight specific and three general categories for all four target individuals and were compared across target individuals.

Overall, mothers were the most likely source of support within the family. Siblings were rated higher than mothers for dating support, and were a more likely source of support than fathers for several areas, including emotional support. Peers were the most likely source of support, with higher ratings than siblings in all categories, and higher ratings than parents in all areas except financial support, career planning and personal values.

Ratings were similar across gender, but where differences did exist females were more likely to go to peers and mothers for support than were the males. In several circumstances females were likely to go to peers at times when males would be as or more likely to seek out a family member. Younger adolescents showed strong preferences for mothers and peers, while older adolescents were likely to give higher ratings to fathers and siblings in several areas of concern. Peers were again rated higher than the other targets on most areas of support seeking. These findings reinforce the importance of context and its interaction with gender and age in determining adolescents' support seeking behavior.

Due to the variety of changes and demands placed on adolescents, there is a burden on them to have dependable interpersonal resources. The major sources of support for adolescents are family members and friends. Various attempts have been made to determine how adolescents use these social resources, but the result has been inconsistent findings, particularly when considering the role siblings might play. Evidence that siblings may influence family relations (O'Brien, 1989) suggests that they may be an important social resource for adolescents, much as they are in families with chronically ill children (O'Brien, E., 1987).

Sociometric survey and self-disclosure research are methodologies which may provide insight into how adolescents perceptions of available social resources. Several studies have supported the notion that along with parents and peers, siblings play a positive role and do provide support during adolescence (Valiant, 1983; Blyth, Hill & Thiel, 1982; Bowerman & Dobash, 1974). However, the research findings overall have been inconsistent with regards to sibling roles. Wilks (1986) and Keats (1983) found that parents and peers were named by adolescents as the people from whom they would most likely seek advice in specific situations, with little evidence that siblings were regarded as important sources of support during adolescence.

The use of inconsistent procedures and lack of standardized methodology (such as the way choices are presented to subjects) across studies of this type may be the reason for the inconclusive nature of this research. Some early studies looking at adolescent self-disclosure patterns do not even include siblings as a support/ disclosure choice, (Rivenbark, 1971; West & Zingle, 1969). The failure to include siblings as options during the adolescents' selection of the target person with whom they would choose to disclose to or seek support on selected topics, obscures the potential

impact of a readily available relationship that has been operating since childhood.

This study sought to compare independent ratings of how likely adolescents would be to seek help or support from their mother, father, closest sibling and closest friend when confronted with a series of common adolescent concerns. Rather than using a forced choice approach or using nominal or ordinal rating systems, this method allows adolescents to give interval scale ratings which will allow statistical comparisons across target individuals.

METHOD

This cross-sectional study surveyed 242 high school and college students. Forty-five percent of the subjects were males, with about 30% early adolescents (12-16 yrs) and 70% late adolescents (17-22 yrs). Subjects were included in the study if they named closest siblings and closest peers who were within seven years of their own age, and if they came from intact families. In choosing a "closest sibling" and "closest peer," subjects were directed to ignore age and gender, and select the sibling and peer with whom they felt most close.

Subjects used a 5-point Likert scale to rate how likely he/she would be to seek support from each target individual (mother, father, closest sibling, closest peer) when confronted with each of 24 concerns common to adolescence. The scale was administered four separate times, allowing subjects to make an independent assessment of each target individual.

The 24 concerns were grouped into eight areas: Financial Concerns, Future/Career Planning, Health, Lifestyle, School Problems, Dating concerns, Family Problems and concerns about Personal Values (Table 1). Items were also grouped into the more general categories of Emotional, Informational and Material Support. Mean scores were generated for each of the eight specific and three general categories. A series of paired t-tests compared the differences between these

mean scores for all combinations of paired targets (mother/father, mother/sibling, father/sibling, mother/peer, father/peer, and sibling/peer).

RESULTS and CONCLUSIONS

Overall, mothers were the most likely source of support within the family. Fathers were rated lower than mothers in all categories except Future Concerns. Siblings were rated higher than mothers for only Dating Support, and were a more likely source of support than fathers for Health and Lifestyle Concerns, Dating Concerns, Family Problems and Emotional Support. Peers were the most likely source of support for all adolescents, with higher ratings than siblings in all categories, and higher ratings than both parents in all areas except Financial Support, Future/Career Planning, Personal Values and Material Support, and higher than fathers on support for Family Problems. Comparisons are presented in Table 2.

Gender differences. Patterns of support seeking were generally similar across gender (See Tables 3 and 4), but where differences did exist females were more likely to go to peers and mothers for support than were the males. In areas such as Future/Career Planning, Lifestyle, Dating Support and Personal Values, males were as likely to seek support from fathers as from mothers, but for females this was only true about Future/Career Planning. Males were more likely to seek support from fathers than siblings in all categories except Dating, while females, however, rated siblings higher than fathers on Health, Lifestyle, Dating, Family Problems and Emotional Support. In general, both males and females rated peers as more likely sources of support than siblings. It also appeared that females preferred peers in situations in which males would be as likely or more likely to seek out a parent.

Stage differences. Younger adolescents showed strong preferences for mothers and peers,

while older adolescents appeared likely to give higher ratings to fathers and siblings in several areas, including Family Problems, Future/Career Planning, Financial Concerns and School Problems (See Tables 5 and 6). The younger subjects showed strong preferences for fathers over siblings in many areas, but the older group rated siblings higher than fathers on Health, Lifestyle, Dating and Emotional Support. The positive role of siblings became more apparent among the older group of adolescents. When compared to mothers, siblings were as likely a source as mothers for only Dating Support among the younger group, however, the older group rated sibling higher than mothers on support for concerns regarding Dating and Lifestyle, and were as likely a source as mothers for Family Problems and Emotional Support. Peers were again rated higher than the other targets on most areas of support seeking.

As expected, these findings reinforce the importance of context (Hunter, 1985; Youniss, 1980) and its interaction with gender and age in determining adolescents' support seeking behavior. Gender preferences are evident in several areas, with males being more likely to use all family resources, including fathers. Meanwhile, older adolescents, who are individuating with family members, appear more apt than younger adolescents to assess the areas in which a particular individual may be a useful resource, resulting in a broader range of support seeking.

Siblings, in general, were not rated as high as other targets, particularly by the younger subjects. The mean level of sibling ratings within most categories, however, does give an indication that adolescents recognize the value siblings may have, and in many cases they are rated higher than or close to parents. Similar to the findings of Pulakos (1989), siblings are consistently rated below peers as sources of support.

Parents continue to serve a very practical role for adolescents, with ratings consistently high for Financial, Career/Future Planning and Material Support, even when compared with peers.

Concern for Personal Values was another area in which adolescents expect to seek parental guidance. This is further evidence that changes in family relationships that occur during adolescence may result in continued positive interactions between family members.

Adolescents use of resources seem strongly directed towards peers, however all family members remain valid sources of support, particularly in areas in which the adolescents recognizes their experience and expertise. The increased use of siblings as a resource among older adolescents indicates that they are good social resources and need to be considered in future studies of this type.

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Table 1.

THINK ABOUT TIMES YOU HAVE A PROBLEM OR CONCERN OR JUST NEED SOMETHING. CIRCLE THE RESPONSE THAT INDICATES HOW LIKELY YOU ARE TO SEEK HELP OR SUPPORT FROM YOUR CLOSEST FRIEND WHEN YOU...

1	2	3	4	5
I WOULD NOT APPROACH AT ALL	I WOULD PROBABLY NOT APPROACH FOR SUPPORT	I WOULD SOMETIMES APPROACH FOR SUPPORT	I WOULD PROBABLY APPROACH FOR SUPPORT	I WOULD DEFINITELY APPROACH FOR SUPPORT

1.	need money for some new clothes?	1	2	3	4	5
2.	have questions about religion?	1	2	3	4	5
3.	want to know how to behave on a date?	1	2	3	4	5
4.	need money to go out with your friends?	1	2	3	4	5
5.	are trying to make a political choice?	1	2	3	4	5
6.	are making a choice about something you are buying for yourself?	1	2	3	4	5
7.	have questions about changes in your body?	1	2	3	4	5
8.	have problems understanding your schoolwork?	1	2	3	4	5
9.	need to determine whether or not you can afford to buy something?	1	2	3	4	5
10.	want an honest opinion of your appearance?	1	2	3	4	5
11.	want to get involved in a school activity?	1	2	3	4	5
12.	have problems with a boyfriend/girlfriend?	1	2	3	4	5
13.	want information about drugs and alcohol?	1	2	3	4	5
14.	have problems with your teachers?	1	2	3	4	5
15.	want to know how to improve your appearance?	1	2	3	4	5
16.	are trying to decide on a career?	1	2	3	4	5
17.	fight with a brother or sister?	1	2	3	4	5
18.	want to get something that someone you live with has?	1	2	3	4	5
19.	are working in order to buy something in a few years?	1	2	3	4	5
20.	argue with your parents?	1	2	3	4	5
21.	have questions about how to get a date?	1	2	3	4	5
22.	have problems getting along with other friends? ..	1	2	3	4	5
23.	are trying to make a choice between right and wrong?	1	2	3	4	5
24.	are trying to find a job for yourself?	1	2	3	4	5

Table 2.

Paired comparisons of adolescents' expectations to seek support from mothers, fathers, siblings and peers.

Category	Mother/ Father	Mother/ Sibling	Father/ Sibling	Mother/ Peer	Father/ Peer	Sibling/ Peer
Specific						
Financial	M **	M *	F *	M *	F *	P ***
Future/Career	F ***	M *	F *	M **	F *	P *
Health	M *	M **	S *	P *	P *	P *
Lifestyle	M *	--	S *	P *	P *	P *
School	M ***	M *	F *	--	P **	P *
Dating	M *	S *	S *	P *	P *	P *
Family Problems	M *	M **	S ***	--	P *	P **
Values	--	M *	F *	--	--	P *
General						
Emotional	M *	--	S *	P *	P *	P *
Informational	M *	M *	F *	P *	P *	P *
Material	M *	M *	F *	M *	--	P *

Note. *** = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; * = $p \leq .0001$. Significance based on paired t-tests.

M = Mother; F = Father; S = Closest sibling; P = Closest peer.

N = 245.

Table 3.

Paired comparisons of male adolescents' expectations to seek support from mothers, fathers, siblings and peers.

Category	Mother/ Father	Mother/ Sibling	Father/ Sibling	Mother/ Peer	Father/ Peer	Sibling/ Peer
Specific						
Financial	--	M *	F *	M *	F *	--
Future/Career	F **	M *	F *	M ***	F *	P **
Health	M **	--	--	P **	P *	P **
Lifestyle	--	--	--	P **	P *	P *
School	--	M *	F **	--	--	P *
Dating	--	S **	S ***	P *	P *	P *
Family Problems	M *	M **	--	M **	--	--
Values	--	M *	F *	M ***	F **	P *
General						
Emotional	M *	--	--	P **	P *	P *
Informational	M *	M **	F *	P ***	--	P *
Material	M **	M *	F *	M *	F **	P ***

Note. *** = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; * = $p \leq .0001$. Significance based on paired t-tests.

M = Mother; F = Father; S = Closest sibling; P = Closest peer.

N = 109.

Table 4.

Paired comparisons of female adolescents' expectations to seek support from mothers, fathers, siblings and peers.

Category	Mother/ Father	Mother/ Sibling	Father/ Sibling	Mother/ Peer	Father/ Peer	Sibling/ Peer
Specific						
Financial	M **	M *	F *	M *	F **	--
Future/Career	--	M *	F *	M ***	F ***	P *
Health	M *	M **	S *	P *	P *	P *
Lifestyle	M *	--	S *	P *	P *	P *
School	--	M *	F **	P **	P *	P *
Dating	M *	S ***	S *	P *	P *	P *
Family Problems	M *	--	S **	P **	P *	P *
Values	--	M *	F *	--	--	P *
General						
Emotional	M *	--	--	P **	P *	P *
Informational	M *	M **	F *	P ***	--	P *
Material	M **	M *	F *	M *	F **	P ***

Note. *** = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; * = $p \leq .0001$. Significance based on paired t-tests.

M = Mother; F = Father; S = Closest sibling; P = Closest peer.

N = 133.

Table 5.

Paired comparisons of younger adolescents' expectations to seek support from mothers, fathers, siblings and peers.

Category	Mother/ Father	Mother/ Sibling	Father/ Sibling	Mother/ Peer	Father/ Peer	Sibling/ Peer
Specific						
Financial	M **	M *	F *	M *	F *	--
Future/Career	--	M *	F *	M *	F *	P **
Health	M *	M **	S ***	P ***	P *	P *
Lifestyle	M ***	M *	--	P ***	P *	P *
School	M **	M *	F *	M **	--	P *
Dating	M **	--	--	P *	P *	P *
Family Problems	M *	M *	F *	--	--	P **
Values	--	M *	F *	M *	F *	P *
General						
Emotional	M *	M *	--	P **	P *	P *
Informational	M *	M *	F *	M ***	--	P *
Material	M **	M *	F *	M *	F **	P **

Note. *** = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; * = $p \leq .0001$. Significance based on paired t-tests.

M = Mother; F = Father; S = Closest sibling; P = Closest peer.

N = 69.

Table 6.

Paired comparisons of older adolescents' expectations to seek support from mothers, fathers, siblings and peers.

Category	Mother/ Father	Mother/ Sibling	Father/ Sibling	Mother/ Peer	Father/ Peer	Sibling/ Peer
Specific						
Financial	--	M *	F *	M *	F **	--
Future/Career	F **	M *	F *	--	F ***	P *
Health	M *	--	S *	P *	P *	P *
Lifestyle	M *	S ***	S *	P *	P *	P *
School	--	M **	F ***	P *	P *	P *
Dating	M *	S *	S *	P *	P *	P *
Family Problems	M *	--	S **	--	P *	P *
Values	--	M *	F *	--	--	P *
General						
Emotional	M *	--	S *	P *	P *	P *
Informational	M *	M **	--	P *	P *	P *
Material	M **	M *	F ***	--	--	P **

Note. *** = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; * = $p \leq .0001$. Significance based on paired t-tests.

M = Mother; F = Father; S = Closest sibling; P = Closest peer.

N = 161.